


# JOURNEY INTO THE FUTURE

Foretelling the future of today's libraries is more than just an amusement involving devices of varying reliability. Our organizations' survival may well depend upon our ability to foresee what lies ahead of us. If we view this enterprise of forecasting the future as being like a trip through uncharted territory, we may feel akin to the pioneers in their wagon trains. How appropriate for this centennial occasion when we are celebrating our history to relate our current adventure to that of our ancestors. We, in our individual libraries, are traveling together, each wagon with its own bit of baggage and its own family unit. We are a group of smaller communities bound together for the sake of the journey. The size of our families, the clarity of purposes, and the specificity of our precise destinations may vary, but we are definitely heading the same direction. On a daily basis, we venture into new ground, share resources, and find strength in numbers.

Our caravan moves forward with more assurance if there is a "scout" to send on ahead to scope out the country that lies before us. This function is one that state library agencies fulfill for the members of their library communities. As scouts, the first thing those of us at the Delaware Division of Libraries need to do is to take a good look at the landscape around us.

In that scenery, there are hints of what awaits us around the next bend. Public libraries have traditionally been agencies that provide services to a particular age group. We provide services to those who are somewhere between birth and death. That sounds pretty all inclusive. One would not expect sensational changes in what this encompasses. However, we are experiencing dramatic differences in attitudes toward public service institutions, as well as the needs and demands of the people we serve. Not only are total numbers growing, but also there is increasing diversity in our potential user base, their cultural backgrounds, technological sophistication, and expectations. We are serving a growing number of older people. We serve a large number of aging "Baby Boomers" while simultaneously we are attempting to meet the needs of the youngest of their children, who grew up in a different world. Their world has always had Star Wars, video players, and AIDS. Add to this current brain development research and emphasis on early childhood development with the affiliated importance of reading to the very young child. There is an obvious role for the public library in preparing our children to enter school ready to learn. "Birth to death" is evolving to encompass more and more very specific focused services. We have spent years trying to be all things to all people. Every day we are facing more and more "things to be" and more and more people for whom to be them.



The next opportunity in our terrain has to do with ever changing technologies, which continually bring us new formats. In turn, new formats bring constant need for training and, in some instances, even political and social ramifications. Our libraries aspire to stay apprised of new technologies and at the same time continue to support the old “technologies.” We strive to provide the appropriate resources for all, including providing access and training for the segment of our society that is in danger of being left on the other side of the digital divide.

We continually struggle to maintain each niche we have carved out in the worlds of our customers. In today's society, our potential users have too many commitments to be frivolous with their time. Anything they or we commit our schedules to needs to be worth it. This intense value that we place on our time is integral to the countryside in which we find ourselves.

The final topographical element in this landscape we are scouting our way through is the overwhelming flood of information available to everyone everywhere. Libraries are not the only potential providers. Libraries need to define their special role, whether it is knowledge management, authentication, or navigation. However, whatever that role is, simply claiming it as our own is not enough. We truly need to get that message out. We can not compete if people don't even see us as contenders.

How we, as pioneers, will deal with our new terrain is impacted by our traditional behaviors. Historically our libraries, especially public libraries, have had to balance multiple roles. They serve as archivists, preservationists, storytellers, researchers, trainers, and information sifters and seekers. Even as we face change and desire a more vibrant image, we do not want to turn our back on our ability to multi-task these established roles. If our libraries are responsive to the changes impacting us, we will have a progressive journey and remain viable. In order to be successful, it is essential that we keep our focus in three areas: community, customization, and customer satisfaction.

Community based planning is key. Our communities vary from one to the next. Their personalities are different and it makes sense that the library be as individual and unique as the community whose needs it is designed to meet. Remember each wagon in our caravan has both a particular family membership and a unique destination.

Customization of the services we offer becomes more and more necessary as the competition grows. What is it that the public library can do extra well, which makes it the preferred choice when the information seekers need answers, or the recreational readers need their pleasure reading? Perhaps the answer is different for each and every customer we serve.

It is flexibility and a commitment to shape what we offer to provide that extra value that will make our libraries the source of choice for our customers.

Most importantly, our customers must remain the central focus of the services we provide. We can no longer afford to do things simply because we always have in the past. We have too many demands upon our resources to provide services that are no longer needed. Our success depends upon the continued satisfaction of the people whose multiple needs we are trying to meet.

Just as our libraries fulfill multiple roles in meeting the needs of their customers, state library agencies must do the same for their customers. And just as our libraries are experiencing a changing customer base, so are we. Our primary customer group is made up of these developing libraries themselves. Our secondary customer group is made up of all Delawareans. One of our enduring considerations needs to be providing the safety net that helps maintain equity of access. We need to continually monitor our potential users and make sure that dynamic issues and trends have not created un-served or under-served population groups.

State library agencies need to be a support resource for our libraries. Sometimes this takes the form of money, sometimes of professional consultation. We assist libraries in working with their communities to define and achieve objectives that meet the needs of each unique community.

We need to provide staff training to help libraries fit in and find a role that makes them worth the time, effort and sustained loyalty of their customers. We need to help them prepare themselves for the future, whatever it brings. We need to help them acquire the tools and skills, and even help them reshape their agencies so that they continually serve as useful facets of their communities' infrastructures.

The State Agency needs to provide leadership, not "leadership" in the sense of a hierarchy, but rather as a "scout" who heads out in advance of an expedition in order to guide the group forward together. We need to be on the lookout for situations that might cause problems and put our group in peril. We need to see the trends. Help our traveling party be prepared for what is ahead. Plan for success. The members of our expedition will look to us to advise a course of action. And, we will be prepared to do so because we will always be keeping abreast of what may be around the next bend. We need to help our libraries and their communities position themselves for success, just as the Delaware Library Commission did 100 years ago.